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The Politics of Knowledge and Theory Construction in Adult Education: A Critical Analysis from an Africentric Feminist Perspective

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Abstract: *The Eurocentric worldview has dominated research and practice in adult higher education at the exclusion of other worldviews. Using the contours of the Africentric tradition, this paper examines the philosophical assumptions of andragogy and self-directed learning for their applicability to understanding and facilitating learning and knowledge construction among members of African descent.*

Introduction

The concept of cultural diversity in higher education in the United States has been restricted to discussions and debates focusing primarily on enhancing the presence of students and faculty of color, with special emphasis on retention and recruitment (Blackwell, 1987; Carter & Wilson, 1994). A more important dimension of cultural diversity that has received scant attention is the diversification of the philosophical foundations of higher education. If we hold the assumption that the various institutions found in our society mirror the predominant values of that society, then it is reasonable to assume that the philosophical underpinnings of adult higher education emanate primarily from a European-American worldview. As a result of this ethnocentric and exclusive worldview, theories and models are conceptualized, for the most part, with little regard for the worldviews or epistemological orientations of the other ethnic group members of our society. Noting that the dominant theories influencing the practicing of adult education were developed using the Eurocentric epistemological orientation, we must continue to challenge the underlying assumptions that the values present in these theories are universal to all groups.

Andragogy and Self-Directed Learning: Two Major Concepts of Adult Learning

Within the last quarter of this century, andragogy (Knowles, 1975, 1984) and self-directed learning (Houle, 1961; Knowles, 1975; & Tough, 1971) have dominated the field of adult education. These theoretical constructs have been the momentum for much research, debate, and practical implications in the field. Malcolm Knowles (1975, 1984) popular-

ized the concept of andragogy, “the art and science of teaching adults” from pedagogy, “the art and science of teaching children” within United States adult education. The concept of andragogy has the following assumptions: (1) Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it; (2) adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions and for their own lives; (3) adults come into an educational activity with a greater volume and a different quality of experience than youths; (4) adults become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do it in order to cope effectively with real-life situations; (5) adults’ motivation to learning is enhanced if the learning is relevant to every day life; and (6) the most important motivation to learning comes from an internal desire to learn. (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998, pp. 64-68).

Another major theoretical construct that has dominated adult learning theory is self-directed learning. This concept grew out of andragogy and suggests that adults have a need to direct their own learning. According to Caffarella (1993), “From this perspective, the focus of learning is on the individual and self-development, with learners expected to assume primary responsibility for their own learning. The process of learning, which is centered on learner needs, is seen as more important than the content” (p. 26). The assumptions of self-directed learning, therefore, view the learner as having the power and the intellectual capacity to diagnose, plan, implement, and evaluate her own learning.

While these learning theories have dominated research and the practice of adult education, it is important to continue the critical analysis of these legendary works to determine whether the values and assumptions that these espouse still hold as

valuable constructs in the evolving field of adult education in a multicultural society. In addition, adult education must consider other worldviews, philosophical models, and theoretical constructs in order to build more inclusive institutions of higher learning. One alternate philosophical model that has received little attention in adult education is the Africentric model (sometimes referred to as the Afrocentric model). The Africentric model can be used as a lens through which to critically examine models of adult education theory and practice for their inclusiveness and adaptability to an audience beyond those of European descent.

Therefore, the primary question guiding this analysis is “To what extent are the values and assumptions that the concepts of andragogy and self-directed learning espouse culturally relevant in today’s field of adult education that values diversity and different ways of knowing and knowledge construction?” This paper, therefore, will examine the philosophical assumptions of these theoretical constructs from the perspectives of critical Africentric feminist epistemology (Collins, 1990).

The Africentric Perspective

The Africentric model has been described as a philosophical model based on traditional African philosophical assumptions (Asante, 1987, 1988; Baldwin and Hopkins, 1990, Schiele, 1994). A basic assumption of the Africentric conceptual framework is that African Americans have a distinct cultural orientation (Asante, 1987; Baldwin, 1981; Nobles, 1980; Schiele, 1994). In addition, it is assumed that despite the influence of the Euro-American culture, African Americans tend to operate within the influence of the African worldview (Baldwin, 1984; Nobles, 1980). Therefore, efforts to understand African American relationships and experiences must incorporate the values and principles of the African American worldview. As Bell, Bouie, and Baldwin (1990) note, “The African-American worldview is rooted in the historical, cultural, and philosophical tradition of African people. This worldview incorporates Black behaviors and psychological functioning from the perspective of a value system which prioritizes the affirmation of Black life” (p. 169).

According to Schiele (1994), “Afrocentricity is viewed as being distinct from and oppositional to Eurocentricity with a distinct set of cosmological, ontological, epistemological, and axiological attrib-

utes” (p. 152). Cosmologically, the Africentric model holds the view that all elements of the universe are interconnected (Nobles, 1980) and that humanity, nature, and the self are conceptualized as the same phenomenon. Ontologically, the Africentric model assumes that all elements of the universe are spiritual, and that they are created from a similar spiritual substance (Akbar, 1984; Nobles, 1980). The focus on spirituality supports the cosmological view of interdependency and assumes that for elements to be considered interdependent, there must be a universal link and that link is the spirit of the creator (Akbar, 1984; Baldwin, 1981; Nobles, 1980). Epistemologically, the Africentric perspective places considerable emphasis on an affective way of obtaining and demonstrating knowledge (Akbar, 1984, Asante, 1988; Schiele, 1994). Constructing and acquiring knowledge through emotions or feelings is considered valid and critical from an Africentric perspective. Affect as a means of knowing does not discount the concept of rationality, but suggests that there are alternate ways of knowing that must be considered. The axiological dimension emphasizes the value of interpersonal relationships. The maintenance and enhancement of harmonious interpersonal relationship is considered the most important cultural value in the Africentric tradition (Schiele, 1994).

Building on the Africentric worldview, Patricia Hill Collins (1990) has proposed an Africentric feminist epistemological framework for understanding and assessing knowledge claims among people of African descent, particularly Black women. As Collins (1990) notes,

Despite varying histories, Black societies reflect elements of a core African value system that existed prior to and independently of racial oppression . . . and that Black people share a common experience of oppression . . . This Afrocentric consciousness permeates the shared history of people of African descent through the framework of a distinctive Afrocentric epistemology. (p. 206)

Africentric feminist epistemology acknowledges a way of knowing that is grounded in African centered traditions. According to Sheared (1996), “among Africentric feminist and Africentric scholars, the term is used to address the ways in which people of African ancestry construct their world-

views” (p. 10). Although Collins (1990) developed the framework from the perspective of Black women’s standpoint, it is by no means exclusive to Black women.

Analysis of Adult Learning Theories from the Africentric Feminist Perspective

The Africentric feminist perspective is based on the following assumptions: (1) concrete experiences as a criterion for meaning; (2) the use of dialog in assessing knowledge claims; (3) the ethic of caring; and (4) the ethic of personal accountability (Collins, 1990). These assumptions provide a framework for the analysis of andragogy and self-directed learning to determine their applicability to other ways of knowing that are not rooted in the European-American tradition.

Concrete Experience as a Criterion for Meaning and Credibility

This dimension highlights the importance of personal experience as central to the learning process and suggests two types of knowing—knowledge and wisdom (Collins, 1990). According to this concept, one acquires knowledge through wisdom, which is the ability to negotiate the forces in one’s life through intuition. For the African American, it is knowing how to live and survive despite oppressive forces. It is through the validation of such wisdom that knowledge is acquired. One of the assumptions of this view is that anyone making a knowledge claim must have acquired first hand experience of the claim in order to be viewed as credible. This calls for the instructor/facilitator to disclose personal experiences relevant to topics under discussion. This practice highlights the humanness of the instructor and encourages marginalized students to move closer to the center and find their voice to articulate their own experiences, albeit different from those of the majority. Unless students with alternate worldviews can find their voices to articulate their constructed knowledge, only the experiences of elite students will form the bases for knowledge construction and validation, thus perpetuating the tradition of power domination in knowledge construction.

Andragogy and self-directed learning acknowledge the importance of the learner’s experience in facilitating adult learning; however, they do not acknowledge the facilitator’s experience as a valuable

part of the pedagogical process. From the Africentric perspective, this is critical because as Collins notes, “For most African American women, those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences (p. 209).

The notion of experience, however, remains elusive in these learning concepts. African American experience is centered in a culture of race, class, and gender oppression, which is often managed through wisdom or intuitive knowledge. What is not clear is the value that these learning concepts place on subjective knowing. In a Eurocentric educational culture that values objective ways of knowing, the degree to which other ways of knowing are brought in from the margin to the center must be explored. The elitist nature of objective ways of knowing can suppress the learning and knowledge construction among those situated in the Africentric tradition.

Use of Dialog in Assessing Knowledge Claims

Dialog implies a talk between two subjects, not a speech of subject and object (hooks, 1989). Learning in communities and groups where dialog occurs is one of the hallmarks of the Africentric epistemological framework. This dimension emphasizes connection rather than separation in the construction and validation of knowledge. The importance of finding one’s voice to articulate one’s knowledge claim is supported through this epistemological dimension.

Andragogy and self-directed learning emphasize learning as an individualistic process with a primary goal of self-development. Caffarella and Merriam (1999) in their discussion of self-directed learning note, “. . . learning on one’s own or self-directed learning has been the primary mode of learning through the ages . . .” While this may be so, I suggest that the tasks mastered or acquired from the learning project or activity do not remain solely with the individual learner; that the activity (accomplished or unaccomplished) is shared and discussed with other individuals and groups. Therefore, andragogy and self-directed learning do not address the social implications of the learning. For knowledge to be validated, it must be made public, and that is done in relationships with individuals or within a community. Although andragogy highlights the need for dialog between instructor and student and suggests the benefits of

collaborative learning, it does not emphasize the relationship that develops among students. Therefore, these learning concepts minimize the importance of contexts, social relationships, and connections as important dimensions in the construction and validation of knowledge. For members of the African Diaspora who are oriented towards the Africentric tradition of collectivism, the individualistic nature of these learning concepts (in their pure form) may become barriers to learning and community building.

The Ethic of Caring

An ethic of caring suggests that personal expressions, emotions, and empathy are central to the learning and the construction of knowledge. This dimension of the Africentric framework places great emphasis on individual uniqueness within an African-centered collective identity, the use of emotion and dialog in learning, and the capacity for empathy in understanding another's knowledge claim (Collins, 1990). Self-identity can only be articulated and validated in relationships and connections of mutual trust. Andragogy and self-directed learning perspectives highlight the importance of a trusting environment in facilitating adult learning. According to Knowles (1984), the responsibility of the facilitator is to "provide a caring, accepting, respecting, helping, social atmosphere" (p. 17). It is assumed that such an atmosphere will promote an ethic of care and encourage the articulation of one's self-defined standpoint. While this suggestion is highly regarded, the theory is simplistic in its ideology that participants, upon entering the classroom, will dispense their prior judgements, myths, and assumptions about other cultural groups to create this environment of trust and acceptance. It also assumes that we all come to the classroom with the same positional power (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1997) and it fails to account for sociocultural differences that determine who gets heard and whose experiences get validated.

The Ethic of Personal Accountability

This dimension suggests that, not only must individuals develop their knowledge claims through dialog and present them for the validation by others, it also suggests that those making knowledge claims are expected to be held accountable for their claims. According to Kochman (1981), "Assessment of an individual's knowledge claims simultaneously

evaluate an individual's character, values, and ethics. African Americans believe that all views expressed and actions taken are thought to derive from a central set of core values and beliefs (Cited in Collins, 1990, p. 218). This suggests that those centered in the Africentric tradition evaluate not only the knowledge that is articulated, but also the person who is making the claim. This highlights the Africentric view of the personal and subjective nature of learning, which emphasizes that one cannot separate what is known from the one who claims to know.

Andragogy and self-directed learning theory do not factor in the assessment of knowledge claims and the credibility of the one making the claim. Although self-directed learning promotes assessment of one's learning, it does not emphasize the critical assessment of others' claims. Because African Americans have had their experiences and histories distorted and misrepresented, they remain suspicious of those who claim to be experts (Guy, 1996). Since andragogy and self-directed learning focus primarily on the learner, they fail to acknowledge the social consequences in the process of knowledge construction.

Summary

These two concepts about learning construe the learner as an individual with equal power to make decisions about her learning with little or no regard for extraneous or contextual variables. Both andragogy and self-directed learning focus primarily on the individual perspective and view learning as a purely psychological phenomenon. The psychological paradigm holds the notion that learning is a cognitive process and is internal to the individual (Caffarella, 1993). This view disregards the social construction of knowledge, which is of significant value among members of the African Diaspora, women, and other ethnic groups.

The concepts of andragogy and self-directed learning tend to ignore the politics of positionality (power relations, race, class, gender, and ethnicity) and their influence on the teaching and learning dynamics in the classroom (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1997). They support the notion of universality with the assumption that adult educators can use one design strategy or theoretical model with all participants.

Despite the shortcomings of these concepts, they have had a profound impact on our understanding

and practice of adult education. Both concepts stem from humanistic philosophical orientation that fosters individual growth and development in a respectful, caring environment. They support the Africentric value that the learner's experience is a powerful tool in the construction of knowledge. However, the learner's experiences are not conceptualized from the same perspectives. Africentric experiences are conceptualized in communities, through the oral tradition of story telling, music, dance, and other affective ways of knowing. The concepts of andragogy and self-directed learning highlight the value of the learner's experiences in the construction of knowledge, but do so from an individualistic and private sphere and not from a sociocultural context.

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